

## The Gospels as Histories

### What sort of history are they?

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The Gospels are some sort of history. In other words, they are narratives about the past. They tell the story of Jesus as a series of events that took place in the past. Scholars may disagree as to how reliable they are as history, but that they are some sort of history would be very widely agreed. I am not directly concerned in this lecture with the historical reliability of the Gospels, though what I say will be relevant to that. I want to focus on questions about the kind of historiography they are. For there is not just one way of writing history. That's true in the modern period and it was also true in the ancient Greco-Roman world.

So what I shall do in this lecture is compare the Gospels with types of ancient historiography and with certain types of modern historiography. I think these comparisons will help us to recognize aspects of the Gospels that, if we are familiar with the Gospels, we may well just take for granted but which become very interesting once our attention is focused on them.

#### *Comparisons with ancient historiography*

#### The Gospels as Greco-Roman biography

We begin with the question of the literary genre of the Gospels. The genre of a piece of literature is a matter of considerable importance because it determines the expectations with which readers come to that work and how they are going to read it. What you expect of a book and how you read it will be very different, depending on whether you think it's a novel or a collection of short stories or a historical work or a travel narrative or whatever. Nowadays we usually know this from the jacket of a book even before we open it just what sort of book it is, and usually we recognize the genre of a piece of writing intuitively without having to think about it. But ancient literature doesn't necessarily fit into the genres we know today, and so we have to think: what would the first readers of this book have thought it was, generically?

What would the first readers of the Gospels have thought they were? What category of literature in that period and place would the Gospels have most resembled? For most of the twentieth century most New Testament scholars were pretty sure of one thing: that the Gospels are not biographies. I suppose because modern people might easily suppose that the Gospels are biographies, lives of Jesus, twentieth scholars routinely emphasized: the Gospels are not biographies. They had a number of reasons for saying that, but probably most important was this: The Gospels are not lives of Jesus but proclamation of Jesus. They were not written to inform us about the past, but to evoke faith in Jesus the living Lord. They are oriented not to the past of Jesus,

but to his present lordship as the risen and ascended Lord who is present with believers in their fellowship.

However, in the past twenty years scholarly views have changed rather dramatically, especially as a result of a book by British scholar Richard Burridge (*What are the Gospels?* 1992) which has convinced a great many people that the Gospels are, after all, biographies. Burridge argues that this is how the first readers of the Gospels are likely to have identified them. He stresses, however, that we should be thinking of the ancient Greco-Roman biography, not the sort of biographies we may be familiar with in the modern world. Ancient biographers were not necessarily interested in some of the things that modern biographers are. For example, they were not interested in personality, so much as in moral character. They were often not too much concerned with chronology, but might have a broad chronological framework of the subject's life and within that arrange material by topic, rather than by chronological sequence. They might give a lot of space to short anecdotes about the subject.

An important point is that ancient biographies were often intended to impact the lives of their readers: a life of a philosopher, for example, might be intended to recommend that man's philosophy to the readers; or a biography might portray its subject as a shining example of a good life that readers would do well to imitate. So the fact that the Gospels were intended to evoke faith in Jesus and encourage discipleship of Jesus doesn't make them entirely exceptional among ancient biographies.

This is not to say that there was nothing distinctive about the Gospels, compared with other ancient biographies, and I shall say something about that in a moment. But it means that the Gospel writers were not inventing an entirely new sort of literature that readers would not know what to do with. They were adapting an existing genre and developing, we might say, a sub-genre of it.

But before we leave the ways they resemble other biographies, there is a really very significant consequence of identifying them as biographies. Readers of ancient biographies would expect them to be narratives about the past (in that sense historical). A biography might well highlight features of the subject and his life that made them relevant to its readers, but that would not contradict the historical character of the work. So also in the Gospels. The fact that they are written to evoke faith in the risen and living Lord Jesus need not contradict their rather obvious character as narratives about the past. People wanted to know about who Jesus had been in his earthly life and ministry precisely in order to know the same Jesus, risen and alive and accessible to Christian believers in the present. In that sense, early Christians had a real interest in the history of Jesus, and the Gospels cater for that interest.

### **The Gospels as historical biography**

Ancient biographies are of many kinds. There are biographies of kings, politicians, military leaders, poets, philosophers and others. There are biographies written many centuries after their subjects lived and there are biographies written even during the lifetime of their subject. Some of the biographies of almost legendary figures are equally legendary in content. Biographers who wrote long after the time when their subjects lived had to make do with whatever information was available and

sometimes had to use a lot of imagination. Biographers of contemporary figures would be expected to make use of good sources – people who had known the subject well.

The ancients distinguished biography from history because history was defined as political and military history, the history of nations, states and cities. Biography was smaller-scale than history. Anecdotes about a politician that would have no place in history could find a place in a biography of that statesman because they illuminated his character. Biography differed from history in subject matter, but some biographies were much closer than others to history in the methods the author was expected to use to research and compile them. We can call these historical biographies. In particular, history and historical biographies were both expected to be written within living memory, when eyewitnesses to the events or people who had known the subject could be interviewed by the author. Eyewitness sources were essential to good history, and so the ancients thought that real history had to be contemporary history, written within living memory. Similarly a biography written within living memory of its subject might also be presumed to incorporate eyewitness testimony.

In a book called *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, I have argued at length that in the Gospels we really are close to the testimony of the eyewitnesses who knew Jesus and personally witnessed the events of his history. These eyewitnesses were important people in the life of the early Christian movement and they were the sources of the traditions of Jesus' life and teaching that circulated in oral form in the early Christian communities. Indeed, they would have been regarded as the authorities for these traditions, and so when the Gospel writers compiled their Gospels, like good ancient historians or biographers, they drew their material from as close to eyewitness source as they could. The Gospels were written when this was still possible. When the last of the four Gospels, the Gospel of John, was written, very few of the eyewitnesses would have still been alive, but in my view the author of this Gospel was himself an eyewitness, a disciple of Jesus who outlived most of his contemporaries.

I don't want to elaborate further on this topic of the eyewitnesses in this lecture, but I think it is important to point out how it relates to the genre of the Gospels as biographies. As biographies written within living memory of their subject, Jesus, people would have expected them to be based on eyewitness sources. This is something that discussion of the literary genre of the Gospels has not yet taken sufficient account of, in my view.

### **The Gospels as biblical history**

Some scholars have argued that we should look for the genre of the Gospels not in contemporary Greco-Roman literature but rather in the Jewish background of Jesus and his disciples. The Gospel writers were writing the same sort of history as they read in the pages of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. Now it is certainly the case that the Gospel writers understood their work as continuing the biblical history of the Old Testament. The grand narrative of the Old Testament that told the story of God's dealings with his people on the way to the salvation of the world reached its climax, the early Christians were convinced, in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus was the Messiah of Israel and the Saviour of the world, fulfilling the

prophecies of the Old Testament prophets that looked forward to his coming. Jesus was the one who came to put the rule of God into effect in the world, beginning with Israel but extending to the nations. So it was not just the history of Israel but also the history of the world that reached its climax in the history of Jesus.

We can see how deliberately the Gospel writers forged the connexion between their narratives and those of the Old Testament in the way the Gospels begin. Interestingly, they each begin in a different way, but in each case the way they begin is designed to highlight their continuity with the Old Testament. The continuity is perhaps most clearly marked in Matthew. Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus, his family tree traced back as far as David and beyond David to Abraham. This is Matthew's way of saying that Jesus came as the Messiah of Israel, descended from king David, but also as the Messiah for Gentiles, the offspring of Abraham whom God had promised would a blessing to all the nations. But as well as making these specific claims about Jesus as fulfilling the Old Testament expectations of a Saviour, the genealogy also serves to resume the whole of the Old Testament history. All those names of Jesus' ancestors back to Abraham, for people familiar with the Bible, would evoke the various phases of the Old Testament narrative, from Abraham right down to the restoration after the exile.

Mark's way of connecting with the Old Testament at the outset of his Gospel is much briefer and simpler. He quotes a prophecy from Isaiah that was fulfilled, he says, when the first event that occurs in Mark's narrative took place, that is, when John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness to prepare the way for the appearance of Jesus. But Mark too is doing a little more than might at first appear, because the passage of Isaiah he quotes, from the beginning of Isaiah 40, actually opens the passage of prophecy that early Christians most especially understood as predicting the whole course of Jesus' history down to his death and resurrection. So, Mark is saying, here, at the start of my narrative, is where Isaiah's prophecy began to be fulfilled and it went on being fulfilled through out the whole of my narrative down to the resurrection of Jesus.

Luke is different again. Alone among the Gospels he has a formal preface in which he talks about his work as history dependent on eyewitnesses, in the way ancient historians might, but he then plunges into a narrative set in the temple in Jerusalem, where John the Baptist's father is ministering as a priest. Luke is an accomplished Greek stylist and here he writes a sort of biblical Greek that evokes the atmosphere of the Old Testament narratives. We feel as though we are in that heart of the story of Israel, the temple in Jerusalem, beginning where the Old Testament left off.

John's Gospel does not begin with the history of Israel. It begins even further back, as far back as it was possible to go. 'In the beginning...' are its opening words, identical with the opening words of the book of Genesis. Right back there, even before creation, the story of Jesus began. Jesus was the word God uttered when he called creation into being. John's Gospel thus continues, not merely the history of Israel, but the cosmic story of God's creation that began, with the Bible, at Genesis1.

So the Gospels were intended to continue the history the Old Testament narrates, and readers familiar with the Old Testament would be well aware of that from the outset. Does that mean that the Gospels are not, after all, Greco-Roman biography? Is

biblical history an alternative genre that fits better than biography. I do not think so, because it remains the case that the Gospels tell the story of one man, Jesus. Their concentration on the story of this one man is total, and there is nothing quite like that in the Old Testament. There are biographical sequences in the Old Testament, but they belong to broader narratives. They don't really qualify as biographies in the way the Gospels do.

In fact, I think it is quite intelligible to say that the Gospel writers continued the Old Testament story by writing biographies of Jesus. The climax of the Old Testament narrative was the story of the Messiah. Here everything came together in the story of one man, his life, death and resurrection. In order to narrate the messianic climax of the story of the Old Testament, it was natural that the Gospel writers should write biographies, the life, in this case, of the long expected Messiah. So I do not think we have to choose between identifying the Gospels as Greco-Roman biographies and seeing them as continuations of the Old Testament story. To continue the Old Testament story the writers of the Gospel adopted the biographical genre and set about writing it, in part at least, in the ways that would have been expected of the author of a contemporary biography.

At this point I want to turn from comparing the Gospels with the historiography of the ancient world in which they were written to comparing them with some forms of modern historiography. This may not seem like a good idea. It would surely be anachronistic to expect the Gospels to conform to any sort of history that historians started writing only in the twentieth century? Yes, it would be anachronistic, and I shall not suggest that the Gospels simply fit into these categories. But I have found the comparisons with modern historiography illuminating because they bring to light features of the Gospels that we may not notice otherwise. These are ways in which the Gospels differ from the ancient forms of historiography we know. So, whereas up to now, we've been looking at the similarities between the Gospels and other ancient examples of history, the modern comparisons will bring to light some of the dissimilarities.

### *Comparisons with modern historiography*

#### **The Gospels as history ‘from below’**

In the 1960s a group of British historians pioneered an approach to history that they called ‘history from below’ (the term ‘people’s history’ has also been used). Two pioneering classics of this approach were E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) and George Rudé’s *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (1959). The idea was to break away from traditional history written from the perspective of the ruling elite: history from above. History from below was to be written, not just *about* ordinary working people, but from their perspective. In this perspective the common people would be, not just passive objects of the deeds and policies of the elite, but active subjects of their own history.

With this in mind let’s take a look at the social perspective of the Gospels. You have on the handout (appended to this text) an analysis of the social status of the individual characters in Mark’s Gospel. Of the 70 individuals in Mark’s story, I have been able to place 56 of them in this social hierarchy, though naturally in some cases the

classification is rather conjectural. I have compiled charts for the other three Gospels too, but in the time available today I'm taking just Mark as an example. The overall pattern comes out fairly similarly in the other Gospels.

In order to assign social status to the Gospel characters I have adapted a model of an advanced agrarian society that has been widely used. In this kind of society much the largest status category is that of the common people, who typically make up 70-80% of people. They are peasants who work the land and live from it, along with others, such as artisans and small traders who belong to the same social level. These are people who lived near subsistence level or with a modest sufficiency. We would call them poor, but the people the Gospels call poor are not the common people but the destitute, people who had no secure livelihood, but lived pretty much from hand to mouth as casual workers. People physically unable to work, who lived by begging, also come in this category. Even though giving to the destitute was a well recognized Jewish religious duty, it was shameful to be reduced to begging. But below even this social level, there were those I have called outcasts, people who for one reason or another were pretty much excluded from Jewish society.

Moving now to the top of the scale, the elite comprise not only political rulers but also the landed aristocracy, many of whom lived in the cities but drew their income from their large landed estates in the country. Then there is a category of retainers to the elite, those who made their living, whether ample or minimal, from serving the elite.

As I have indicated, the common people comprise most of the population. The elite are a tiny minority, perhaps 2%, the retainers rather more (5-7%), while the groups at the bottom of the scale would also be very small categories, though in times of economic hardship ordinary people might easily find themselves losing their relatively secure livelihood and being reduced to begging or banditry.

Looking at the chart as a whole, we can see that the social world of Mark's story of Jesus spans the whole social spectrum, but is predominantly the world of the common people. We can also see that the highest category, the elite, and the lowest categories, the poor and the outcasts, are numerically over-represented. I have highlighted in bold print those who were friends and followers of Jesus, as well as those he healed, and this enables us to see that Jesus' movement spanned almost the whole social spectrum, from the Jerusalem aristocrat Joseph of Arimathea to a leper and even Gentiles. If we single out the people Jesus healed, they belong mostly to the categories of the poor and the outcasts, often because it was their disabilities that put them in these categories. Jesus himself, of course, a village artisan, was a man of the common people, who reflects the world of peasant farmers in many of his sayings and parables.

This analysis of the social perspective of Mark's Gospel contrasts sharply with the perspectives of both the histories and the biographies of the ancient Greco-Roman world. These are concerned exclusively with the elite and reflect the perspective of the elite classes, to whom the historians themselves also belonged. When non-elite characters do appear in the pages of the historians and biographers, it is because they are needed in a story about the elite, and even so they tend to be retainers rather than the common people. Individuals from the ranks of the common people appear only very rarely. Mostly the common people appear only collectively – as the people, the

masses, the mob, or the troops. The elite writers and their elite characters view the masses with contempt mixed with fear of the irrational and unruly potential of the mob.

By contrast with such history from above, the Gospels adopt a perspective from below. The social world of elite history is turned upside down. Just as in elite history the common people appear only because they are needed in a story about the elite, so in the Gospels many of the elite characters who appear are needed for a story about the non-elite, though this is not the only kind of role that elite characters play. We should also notice that the crowds who feature frequently in the Gospels are not treated with contempt (except on one occasion by some aristocratic Pharisees). The Gospels are history written from below, not from the perspective of the movers and shakers of history, but of ordinary people who in their responses to Jesus participate in making their own history for themselves.

This is not of course to say that the Gospels would pass muster as examples of the history from below that E. P. Thompson and George Rudé advocated and practised, but comparison with the modern approach has brought to light genuine features of the Gospels and significant differences between the Gospels and other ancient historiography.

### **The Gospels as micro-history**

Micro-history was the name given to their approach by a group of Italian historians (Carlo Ginzburg and others) in the 1970s and 80s. Best known, a book that was enjoyed by a wide readership, was Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*. The idea was to shift the focus of history from the big trends and developments as they appear at the macro-level to the study of a specific, small social group, with the aim of observing things that are only visible at the micro-level. Most history takes place at the micro-level and the micro-historians hope by studying at that level to get closer to real life. They seek especially the unusual and the anomalous that could not have been predicted by history written at the macro-level. In this case I can give you an example from the history of China: Roxann Prazniak's book *Of Camel Kings and Other Things*, published in 1999, a study of rural protest in late imperial China. She does not use the term micro-history, but her book in fact consists of micro-historical studies of five Chinese counties where it is possible to identify, with considerable detail and specificity, the local conditions, the protest groups, the individual leaders, and, importantly, the mental worlds they inhabited. Though each story is specific, each is a fragment of a wider picture, and Prazniak allows them to add up to a fresh understanding of rural dissent as involving principled critiques of modernization. This could only be discovered by micro-historical work.

Returning to the ancient Graeco-Roman world, recall that the ancients distinguished between history and biography. History occurs at the macro-level, it is the story of politics and war, the great events that supposedly shaped the destiny of nations. Around the time of the Gospels, there was a dominant grand narrative: the rise of Rome to dominate the Mediterranean world and the triumphant survival of Rome's power despite internal as well as external threats to it. Biography, on the other hand, even though its subjects might well be politicians and generals, was distinguished its

smaller scale. Small matters could reveal character, and a favourite technique was the use of the anecdote, a very short but revealing story about the subject. There are, of course, a lot of these in the Gospels. So this is one reason why the Gospel writers found the literary genre of the Gospels useful: a biography of Jesus could appropriately deal in micro-history.

The conjunction in the Gospels of micro-history and history from below means that in the Gospels we glimpse the lives of ordinary people in a way that very little of ancient literature otherwise affords us. The Gospel stories are made up, to quite a large extent, of little stories about little people, whose lives, but for their connexion with Jesus, would never have been noticed. In this sense, from the perspective of the macro-history of the time, the Gospels bring to light anomalies that challenge the dominant grand narrative of the Greco-Roman historians. In Jesus' many encounters with ordinary people, like the stories of the Samaritan woman or the blind man that John's Gospel so effectively narrates, history was really being made in ways that the dominant grand narrative could not have recognized or assimilated.

The Gospels do subscribe to a grand narrative: the story of God's purpose for the world, begun in the Old Testament, climaxing in the Gospel story of Jesus the Messiah who enacts God's rule in the world. But it's a grand narrative that happens primarily at the micro-level. This God's purpose takes effect at the grassroots of history, where he works with people of all kinds, however unimportant in macro-historical perspective, down to the outcasts and the eradicated, in the little events that make their history. The micro-historical people and particulars of the little stories of the Gospels have universal potential; they are representative of all who will encounter God in Jesus; in a sense they are the grand narrative. In the imagery of one of Jesus' parables, they are the mustard seed, proverbially smaller than all the seeds of the earth, that at the consummation of history will appear as the cosmic tree whose branches have room for all the birds of the air to nest in them.

### **The Gospels as perspectival history**

Finally, I want to take up the challenge of postmodernist history. The migration of postmodern theory from departments of literary studies to departments of history has created an ongoing debate that shows no signs of reaching a resolution. Traditionally historians have understood their work as something like a scientific pursuit of objective truth, bringing to light, through the sophisticated use of evidence, what actually happened in the past. Postmodern historians stress the creativity of historians whose work can be considered literature in the same way as fiction. Historians construct the past and one construction may not be any better than another. To many traditional historians such epistemological relativism threatens the nature of historical research as a disciplined search for the truth.

Clearly I cannot enter that complex debate. I shall make simply two points, one about what I think historiography must not surrender to the postmodernist extreme, but the other about what we might learn from the postmodern approach that can illuminate the Gospels. First, I think historians must continue to maintain the distinction between history and fiction in the sense that history intends to refer to the real past. Historical method is based on that premise, which requires that historians conceive what they

are doing differently from novelists, even if they share with the novelists literary ways of telling their stories.

Secondly, where we can perhaps most profit from the postmodern challenge to traditional history is in recognizing that all history is perspectival. We cannot take a God's eye view of history, or, as someone has described it, the view *from nowhere*. We are ourselves situated in the here and now and so it is *from somewhere in particular* that we view the past. We are situated subjects and can view history only from a particular perspective in our present. This is not a renunciation of objectivity, for our perspectives are perspectives *on something*. Historical work is a constant attempt to represent the past in ways that best accord with the evidence. Nonetheless, for reasons to do with the complexity and otherness of history, its resistance to anything like total comprehension, as well as the constraints and opportunities of the present contexts in which we do history, all history is perspectival. We construct interpretative representations of history that can tell, at best, only part of the story.

Since that is the case, we shall surely come closest to the past reality of events if we take advantage of a plurality of perspectives, including those of the witnesses on whom we depend for their firsthand reports. So, a final way in which the Gospels come closer to some recent approaches to historiography is in their plurality, the simple fact that there are four of them, offering a multiplicity of perspectives on Jesus and his story. The fact that we have four different Gospels has often seemed to Christians an embarrassment. It seemed so already in the second century. Modern study of Jesus has all too often shared the tendency of nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians to seek a definitive account of Jesus, to establish once and for all the facts as they really were. This is over-ambitious. Can we not rather appreciate the fact that our best and earliest evidence offers us four perspectives on Jesus? Since history is irresistibly perspectival, four early perspectives are surely a distinct advantage?

#### Appendix:

#### **Social Status of Individuals in MARK'S GOSPEL (56 out of 70)**

<b>ELITE</b>	Emperor (12:17): Herodian family:  Roman governor: High priest (14:53) Jerusalem aristocracy:  Local elite:	Herod (Antipas) (6:14) Philip (6:17) Herodias (6:17) her daughter (6:22) Pilate (15:2)  <b>Joseph of Arimathea</b> , member of council (15:43) <b>owner of house</b> with large guest room (14:14) <b>Simon "the leper"</b> (14:3) <b>woman</b> with expensive ointment (14:3) <b>Jairus</b> , a "ruler of the synagogue" (5:22) <b>his wife</b> (5:40) <b>his daughter</b> (5:23) rich man (10:17)
<b>RETAINERS</b>		<b>Roman centurion</b> (15:39) scribe (12:28)? <b>Levi</b> , toll collector (2:14)

bodyguard to Herod (6:27)  
 slave girl of high priest (14:66)  
 slave of high priest (14:47)  
 man with water jar (slave) (14:13)?

#### THE COMMON PEOPLE (peasants and equivalent status)

Village artisan:	<b>Jesus</b> , woodworker (+ stonemason?)
Fishermen:	<b>Peter</b> (1:16)
	<b>Andrew</b> (1:16)
	<b>James</b> (1:19)
	<b>John</b> (1:19)
	Zebedee (1:20)
Farm worker:	Simon of Cyrene (15:21)
Others:	<b>Peter's mother-in-law</b> (1:30)
	Mary, Jesus' mother (6:3)
	James, Jesus' brother (6:3)
	Joses, Jesus' brother (6:3)
	Judas, Jesus' brother (6:3)
	Simon, Jesus' brother (6:3)
	4 friends of paralytic (2:3)
	<b>epileptic boy</b> (9:17)?
	<b>his father</b> (9:17)
	young man in Gethsemane (14:51)?

#### THE POOR

Disabled and chronically  
 sick poor (beggars?):

poor widow (12:42)  
**woman with hemorrhage**, impoverished (5:25)  
**demoniac** (1:23)?

**paralytic** (2:3)  
**man with withered hand** (3:1)  
**deaf and dumb man** (7:32)  
**blind man** (8:22)

**Bartimaeus**, blind beggar (10:46)

Barabbas (15:7)  
 2 crucified with Jesus (15:28)

**Gerasene demoniac** (5:2)

**leper** (1:40)

**Syro-Phoenician woman** (7:25)

**her daughter**, a demoniac (7:25)

#### OUTCASTS

Bandits:

Others:

Gentiles: